

Barn Owl

Description:

Barn owls belong to a family of owls that are found around the world. Often called "monkey-faced" owls, they are the owl most often associated with humans WHY?. Their common name comes from their ready use of barns and outbuildings for nesting or roosting sites.

Heart-shaped Face

The barn owl is most easily distinguished from other owls by its white heart-shaped face. The rest of the barn owl's plumage is a golden brown on the back and wings with a contrasting white stomach. In addition, barn owls have fairly long, slender legs. Barn owls are between 14 to 20 inches tall with a four-foot wingspan. The barn owl is lighter in color than other owls its size. No other owl has the heart-shaped, pale face.

How do I Know Its Here?

Barn owls are also one of the most strictly nocturnal (active at night) of the owl species. If owls are mainly nocturnal, how would you know if they are around? Like other owls, barn owls tear apart and swallow their prey-- bones, hair and all. That's quite a meal to digest! The indigestible parts are formed into pellets that are coughed up within 8 to 12 hours after the bird has eaten. These pellets are usually "cast" or coughed up at the owl's roosting site or nest. The barn owl's pellets are 1 to 1.5 inches long and are a dark, bluish grey. They can be torn apart to reveal the skeleton of the animal that the owl ate. Owls also have a distinctive call you might be able to hear at night. (sound byte)

Location, Location, Location

Barn owls will breed any time during the year, depending on the geographic location. Southern birds breed earlier in the year than birds nesting farther north. High rodent populations can allow barn owl pairs to raise two clutches a year in warmer climates. Generally, five to seven eggs are laid and incubated by the female. Both parents care for the owlets after hatching. Youngsters leave the nest 52 to 56 days after hatching. Barn owls are short-lived birds, the average life expectancy is only 1 to 2 years, and most die within the first year. WHY?

Rodent Control

Barn owls are a farmer's friend, specializing in hunting small rodents such as gophers, mice, moles, shrews, rats, and voles. Although it will pounce on prey from a perch, the barn owl normally flies low and mothlike just above the ground, grabbing its prey with long, slender talons. As with other owls, barn owls have a comb-like fringe on the leading edge of the first primary flight feathers allowing the bird to fly silently to ambush and surprise its prey. Voles are the single most important food for the barn owl, followed by shrews, mice and rats. Barn owls wait until twilight before setting off to hunt. During daylight, they roost in a dark, quiet location such as an old building or dense evergreen thicket where they sometimes sleep so soundly that they will not awaken until nightfall.

Predators

The barn owl's ground predators include skunks, possums, snakes, foxes, and feral cats and dogs. The great horned owl will prey on its smaller cousin, and prairie falcons occasionally kill barn owls. However, barn owls don't always fall victim to predators, many other barn owls die during the first few months of their life from collision with fences, power lines, and vehicles. Starvation is another common cause of death especially in northern latitudes when snow covers potential rodent habitat.

Unusual Adaptation

The barn owl's most unusual adaptation is their facial disc. Facial discs give owls their characteristic appearance and act to gather sound around the owl's head toward the ears. Think of a facial disc as being like a satellite dish that gathers sound waves. The sounds are directed toward the owl's ears which are extremely sensitive. Studies using barn owls showed that these owls hunt by sound rather than sight. The ear openings are at slightly different levels and are set at different angles. This enables an owl to better detect where the sound is coming from. They are covered by a flexible ruff made up of short, densely-webbed feathers which further aid the owl in hearing.

Owls also have very large eyes compared with the size of their heads. These large eyes are packed with rod cells that detect low levels of light. All these rod cells give owls excellent night vision and help them navigate around obstacles as they hunt. Owl eyes cannot, however, move up or down or side to side. To make up for this, owls have very flexible vertebrae in their neck that allow them to turn their heads nearly 270 degrees of a circle. This has given rise to the myth that owls can turn their heads completely around.

Getting Along Well with Humans

Given their name, you would expect barn owls to nest in barns. Barn owls are common neighbors with humans, frequently choosing man-made structures such as barns, grain elevators, belfries, abandoned buildings and mines. Natural nest sites include caves, cavities in trees, or holes in banks. Like some falcons, barn owls do not build an actual nest but instead lay their eggs in a previously existing cavity. (Pics of nesting sites) The barn owl is found in open country throughout the warmer regions of the United States. As a group, the barn owls are found worldwide except in the northern-most parts of the world and New Zealand.



Barn Owl
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No Footprint
Footprint

No Map
Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Barn Owl
2. **Scientific Name:** *Tyto alba*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: Male - 14 oz.
Weight: Female - 19 oz.
Height: Male - 12½-14 inches.
Height: Female - 13½-15½ inches.
Wingspan: 43-47 inches.
5. **Diet:** Mainly small rodents, sometimes large insects, reptiles, fish and small birds.
6. **Young:** 5-7 per year, sometimes 2 times a year; called owlets.
7. **Lifespan:** 1-2 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Aves
Order: Strigiformes
Family: Tytonidae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** No
10. **Hunting Link:**